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The Political Socialization of Youth in a Post-Conflict Community

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Abstract

Political socialization affects the development of young people's attitudes in post-conflict societies. Political socialization may support a movement toward positive intergroup relations, or it may influence the perpetuation of intergroup tensions and divisions. In the context of Vukovar, Croatia, political socialization, for youth growing up in a post-conflict community, involves learning about social relations, including relational power and group status within a multi-ethnic community. The current study examines *experiences* of political socialization in this context. Qualitative data from ten focus groups, conducted among 11-, 13-, and 15-year-olds, mothers, and fathers of Serb and Croat ethnicity, *are* analyzed using the constant comparative method. Results indicate a belief in the importance of parents, peers, schools, and the media in the development of youth's political orientations, specifically related to intergroup relations. These attitudes are reflected in the *lived realities of youth as political actors* through their opinions toward intergroup interactions, their experiences of intergroup contact and conflict, and their beliefs about and recommendations for integrated education. Although some avoided any discussion of war, focus group participants' predominant perspective reflected beliefs that the political socialization of youth operated to preserve intergroup tensions and division in Vukovar. The paper concludes with a number of policy and intervention implications.

Keywords: political socialization, intergroup relations, ethnic conflict, children, youth, Croatia

1. The Political Socialization of Youth in a Post-Conflict Community

Nearly 100% of today's civil wars are characterized by ethnic conflict (UNICEF, 2009). In this increasingly prevalent context of ethno-political violence, young people are among those most greatly affected (Barber, 2009). Youth are impacted directly and indirectly by political violence, as combatants, as actors caught in the crossfire, or as witnesses to devastating loss and massive destruction (Cairns, 1996). The impact of political conflict on youth, however, extends beyond the cessation of violence and the signing of a peace agreement. Maturing and developing in post-accord contexts, youth are affected by environments of persistent tension and division (Cummings et al., 2011).

This study explores the interpersonal and societal dynamics that facilitate or inhibit positive intergroup relations for a generation born after mass atrocity. Specifically, [it focuses on the lived realities of political socialization](#), or the ways in which one develops political orientations by learning about socially-relevant community relations. In a setting of intergroup divide, this approach to political socialization may help to understand the development of youth's attitudes toward and behaviors in intergroup interactions (Sapiro, 2004), [in particular how political messages transmitted by key actors relate to whether young people disrupt or maintain the status quo](#). Though studies have focused primarily on the impact of political violence on youth's individual psychological, particularly psychopathological, functioning (Barber, 2009), it is important to examine the broader effects of conflict on youth's intergroup attitudes and behaviors. For example, young people are socialized into politics, and multiple layers of their social ecology are active in the development of their political orientations (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). In this context, youth may shift their identities and social roles to destabilize or build peace (Kosic & Tauber, 2010b; McEvoy-Levy, 2006). In an environment

such as Vukovar, Croatia, where ethno-political tensions are salient, and societal reconciliation has yet to take root (Kosic & Tauber, 2010a; 2010b), processes of political socialization among youth may determine the future of intergroup relations and inter-ethnic harmony.

1.1. The City of Vukovar: A Case Study of a Divided Community

Vukovar is a city in Croatia that lies along the Danube River on the border with Serbia. It is a city of approximately 27,700 inhabitants with a 57% Croat and 35% Serb population (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). Following Croatia's declaration of independence in 1991, the ethnic violence that waged during the breakup of the Former Yugoslavia disrupted the social fabric of Vukovar. During this time, between 7,000 (according to Serb sources) and 14,500 (according to Croatian sources) members of the Serb paramilitary forces, as well as 500 to 600 Croatian defenders, were killed (Sebetovsky, 2002). Of those who fought to defend Vukovar, one third successfully escaped the city following Croatian surrender, while those remaining were captured and sent to Serbian concentration camps (Sebetovsky, 2002). The destruction of trust during the war, alongside feelings of confusion and betrayal, caused the deterioration of intergroup relations between Croats and Serbs (Ajduković & Čorkalo, 2004; Sekulić, Massey, & Hodson, 2006).

Vukovar today represents a divided society. Political policies of ethnic separation permeate social institutions in an effort to safeguard minority rights (Čorkalo et al., 2004). As young people grow up in a context of tension and conflict, and are separated from their peers of different ethnicities, elders worry that conflict and the "ethnicization" of everyday life will continue into the future (Čorkalo Biruški, 2012). Young people in Vukovar have no experience of an integrated community, and thus, cannot recall a city characterized by harmonious intergroup relations and inter-ethnic friendships (Ajduković & Čorkalo Biruški, 2008).

Exploration of the political socialization of young people in such an environment is critical to understanding the perpetuation of tension and violence in Vukovar and to efforts toward the establishment of peace in the region.

1.2. Political Socialization

Almond and Verba's (1963) *The Civic Culture* provided the original theoretical justification for the study of political socialization as a process by which a political culture could be developed. Hyman's (1959) *Political Socialization* offered a more micro-level approach and defined political socialization as an individual's learning of social patterns associated with his/her societal positions as mediated through various agencies of society. In the context of Vukovar, political socialization involves learning about social relations, including relational power and group status within a multi-ethnic community. The concept of political socialization offers a framework for understanding the origins of orientations that are politically-consequential among adults, whether concerning politics specifically or intergroup relations in settings of ethnic divide (Sapiro, 2004; Sears & Brown, 2013).

Although some theories conceive of political socialization as "society's modeling of the child to some a priori model, usually one perpetuating the status quo" (Kinder & Sears, 1985:714), other conceptualizations leave space for action that disrupts current norms (Kuterovac-Jagodić, 2000; Langton, 1969). Adopting Hyman's micro-level approach to political socialization, related to intergroup relations, this study investigates two questions: 1) Are political socialization processes relevant to supporting or disrupting the current system of politically-relevant social relations? 2) Is the transmission of information deliberate? These questions inform the examination of the intentionality of [political socialization](#) between youth

and relevant agents, and the [lived realities](#) of young people's attitudes toward and behaviors in intergroup relations.

Theoretical foundations of political socialization identify its prime agents to be parents, peer groups, schools, and the media. Parents are primary transmitters of social norms and political orientations (Verkuyten, 2002), as well as of prejudicial attitudes (Rodríguez-García & Wagner, 2009). In an environment where ethnic conflict is high, parents play a powerful socialization role (Aboud & Amato, 2001), though their influence on the development of youth's political or intergroup attitudes is rarely deliberate (Kosic & Livi, 2012). Parental influence is often manifested through indirect forms, such as overhearing adult conversations, asking questions about political issues, and listening to stories about national history (Kuterovac-Jagodić, 2000). Moreover, a youth's own political interest and search for meaning is critical; young people are active participants, rather than passive recipients of political socialization (Sears & Brown, 2013), and parental accounts may be accentuated by other forms of social memory, or the shared generational narrative of a people (Cairns & Roe, 2003). These collective narratives may be woven into, or provide the backdrop for, family's stories of survival during conflict (Hammack, 2010).

Peers, educational settings, and the media also play roles in the political socialization of young people (Langton, 1969), but are often filtered by parental influences. For example, parents may direct their children's friendships and dating relationships (Munniksma, Flache, Verkuyten, & Veenstra, 2012). They select the schools their children attend, and they engage with media sources alongside their children, explaining political messages distributed to children through documentaries and news programming (McDevitt, 2006). Despite the primary role that parents

play, peer interactions, education systems, and media messages function to scaffold upon parental influence as youth develop (Kuterovac-Jagodić, 2000).

Peer groups may transmit or reinforce the culture of the wider society or foster behaviors that contradict these values. They provide a social system in which individuals learn new behaviors and attitudes (Langton, 1969), potentially influencing the development of political attitudes (Dubow, Huesmann & Boxer, 2009), as well as reinforcing learned political behaviors (Dishion, Andrews, & Crosby, 1995). Such associations might exacerbate the negative impact of exposure to ethno-political violence among young people or operate to mitigate negative stereotypes and political orientations (Dubow et al., 2009). As young people in Vukovar encounter peers of different ethnicities in educational and in other social settings, processes of political socialization are at work.

Schools also serve as agents of political socialization in their capacity to instill political beliefs formally through conscious, planned instruction, as well as informally through inadvertent, casual experiences in the school environment. Specific political curricula, as well as coursework pertaining to contemporary social debates, influence young people's understanding of political issues (Kuterovac-Jagodić, 2000). Schools can, furthermore, validate the attitudes and behavior patterns developed in the family context, as well as foster the creation of new political orientations (Langton, 1969; Tolley, 1973).

For youth in divided societies, education is pivotal to political socialization, serving as a forum for fostering or diminishing intergroup tension (Hayes & McAllister, 2009; McGlynn, Niens, Cairns, & Hewstone, 2004). Although Croatia has a long history of minority schooling, the separate education of Serb and Croat children, following the war, is viewed as socially and politically divisive (Ajduković & Čorkalo Biruški, 2008). This system, guaranteed by the 1995

Erdut Agreement,² is characterized by the offering of subjects in ethnically-distinctive languages. Intended to last for five years, so as to provide a period in which alternative minority education options could be negotiated, ethnically-separated education continues today; only in 2006 were Croat and Serb children allowed to attend separate, but concurrent, classes in the same building. Previously, all classes were held in ethnically-separated shifts (half-days) or different buildings. With a strong social norm not to associate with the 'other' in public, moreover, children rarely socialize with the out-group outside of the classroom (Ajduković & Čorkalo Biruški, 2008). Consequently, separate schools in Vukovar limit inter-ethnic contacts among peers, reinforce negative inter-ethnic behaviors and attitudes (Čorkalo Biruški & Ajduković, 2007), and shape the political socialization of youth.

In addition to family, peers, and schools, media plays a significant role in the political socialization of youth (Atkin & Gantz, 1978; Conway, Wyckoff, Feldbaum, & Ahern, 1981; Tolley, 1973). Functioning as a source of information about political issues, the media has been shown to be associated with both political knowledge and public affairs interest for young people (Atkin & Gantz, 1978; Conway et al. 1981). Electronic sources of media, in particular, are highly effective as agents of political socialization (Simon & Merrill, 1997). In Vukovar, media is often viewed as opportunistic in its coverage of ethnic tensions and the memorialization of past atrocities (Ajduković & Čorkalo Biruški, 2008; Sekulić et al., 2006). These forms of communication may relate to the preservation of social memory and the interaction of family and collective narrative about the conflict. This perspective suggests important implications for the interpretation of media as an agent of political socialization in Vukovar, particularly toward

² At the end of the war in Croatia, Serbian and Croatian representatives, with international support, signed the Erdut Agreement which included provisions for the protection for minority rights, such as education. By separating the youth immediately after the war, the schooling system also functioned to prevent possible conflicts between the two groups of children. It should be noted that prior to the war, children were enrolled in the same classes offered in Croatia (Čorkalo Biruški & Ajduković, 2007).

explaining how young people accumulate information about political issues.

1.3. Current Study

The first aim of this study is to understand the varying roles of critical agents and the nature of the political attitudes they transmit in the political socialization of youth in Vukovar. The second aim is to describe youths' lived realities of political socialization – the beliefs participants have about how young people in Vukovar disrupt and maintain the status quo. In an environment such as Vukovar, youth are believed to operate as important “political actors,” functioning both as potential threats to peace and as critical peacebuilding resources with significant levels of agency (McEvoy-Levy, 2006). Their attitudes and behaviors are critical to the re-establishment of harmonious relations and to sustainable peacebuilding in Croatia.

2. Method

2.1. Design

This study utilized qualitative data from focus groups to explore what is considered to be the status quo by the participants (Stevenson & Muldoon, 2010). Focus groups are appropriate for research that aims to understand collective experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Frankland & Bloor, 1998). They strike a balance between informal talk and structured interviews (Puchta & Potter, 2004) and enable the discovery of emergent themes and the rich illustration of participants' experiences (Burgess, Ferguson, & Hollywood, 2007). The use of focus groups in this study allowed for a robust analysis of the lived realities of political socialization in Vukovar and a culturally-sensitive understanding of the collective experiences of Croats and Serbs.

2.2. Participants

Participants were selected following a purposeful sampling frame, which maximizes within-case variation (White & McBurney, 2010). That is, focus groups were designed to assess

various ages of youth during important developmental and social transitions, as well as parental perspectives (see Table). Given the importance of ethnicity in this context, recruitment aimed to have a balance of Croat and Serb participants. Overall, ten focus group discussions were conducted; each group consisted of 5 to 9 participants (total $N = 66$; 46.87% Croat, 53.03% Serb) and was homogenous by Croat/Serb ethnicity. Parent focus groups included fathers ($n=12$) and mothers ($n=12$) of similarly aged students, but whose children were not participating in the study; both single-parent (12.5%) and two-parent (74%) families were included (12.5% of parents did not report marital status). Two focus groups (1 Croat, 1 Serb) were conducted with 11-year old ($n=13$), 13-year olds ($n=14$), and 15-year olds ($n=15$) and only one young person from a given family was allowed to participate. This age range was selected because youth were aware of the social distinctions of interest, but did not have direct war experience, allowing for analysis of intergenerational and age-related differences among youth and parents who had differing levels of exposure to ethno-political violence.

2.3. Procedures and Data Collection

In May of 2010, a team of professors and graduate field assistants from the University of Zagreb facilitated ten focus groups in Vukovar, Croatia. Focus group moderators were of Croatian ethnic background; however, their previous experience of working in the same community facilitated trusting and open relations with participants from both backgrounds. Participants were recruited through local community contacts and each focus group lasted approximately sixty to ninety minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the graduate field assistants and translated into English by the focus group moderators. Focus groups were conducted in a semi-structured interview format following an interview schedule, which included a series of catalyst questions and follow-up prompts (Smith & Dunworth, 2003; see

Appendix). Questions for the interview schedule were drawn extensively from prior research and underwent pilot testing in another divided city in Croatia. The treatment of participants was in accordance with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association, and the study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards at all participating universities. For this paper, proper names have been removed to ensure the anonymity of participants.³

2.4. Data Analysis Procedures

The constant comparative method allows for systematic and explicit coding through sensitive and reliable inspection. Adapted for team analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994), the constant comparative method follows an inductive approach.

First, the research team works together to *unitize data into chunks of meaning* (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Identifying phrases that closely capture the essence of the participants' words are applied to each unit (Smith & Dunworth, 2003). Next, during *continuous refinement and inductive category coding* the team reviews each unit, grouping them together into broader, provisional categories (Smith & Dunworth, 2003). As units accumulate, a *rule for inclusion* is created that functions as the basis for including or excluding units of meaning from a provisional category (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Finally, once all of the data have been assigned to a category, the team *explores patterns across categories* and generates comprehensive review of differences and similarities across categories to *highlights emergent themes*.

Data analysis was conducted by a graduate student and a BA-level research assistant with a background in political psychology, who participated in all stages of data analysis and agreed

³ We assigned a six-digit focus group identification (ID) to each youth speaker to indicate the ethnicity, age, sex, and participant number (e.g. C-11-M-04 indicates that the speaker is an 11-year-old male Croat). For parents, we assigned a five-digit ID to indicate ethnicity, gender, and participant number (e.g. S-FA-53 indicates that the speaker is a Serb father).

on the final categories and overarching themes (Muldoon, McLaughlin, & Trew, 2007). Final results were shared with all co-investigators.

3. Results

The results focus on: (1) the agents of political socialization and the nature of their messages for young people, and (2) the lived realities of youth as political actors, demonstrating the effects of political socialization by maintaining or challenging the status quo of intergroup tension and division in Vukovar. Participants noted that explicit messages of political socialization were conveyed by four primary agents: parents, peers, schools, and the media.

3.1. Agents of Political Socialization

3.1.1. Parents. Focus groups revealed a belief in the importance of parents as agents of socialization, operating in closest proximity to young people's functioning. Participants often claimed that youth nationalism results from upbringing in the home. They justified these claims through further elaborations of explicit parent-child interactions pertaining to: (a) the war and (b) ethnicity.

3.1.1.1. The war. Two ways in which parents claimed to approach the topic of the war with their children emerged from the data: discussions of the broader war context, and narratives about family experiences during the war. Croat and Serb parents reported engaging in different patterns of broad discussion with their children. Serb parents, in particular, questioned the need to explain to their children how the war situation really was, and often withheld their perspectives. As one Serb father noted: *"I found it interesting that my kids didn't really know who they are; we never really talked about it; like, it's better that they don't know. And until they became aware of everything, these subjects revolving around the war and everything that happened, I somehow always avoided mentioning it in front of them"* [S-FA-53]. Croat parents,

on the other hand, told their children never to forget the war and the ways in which Croats, as a group, suffered. One Croat mother described such interactions that she has with her children: *“I didn’t lose anyone in the war... but I like to explain it to the children and I like to remind them, every year on the day Vukovar fell, ‘Children, don’t ever forget this...”* [C-MO-57].

Parents also claimed to share information with their children about their personal and family’s experiences and traumas suffered during the war. Though Serb parents reported that they avoided explaining to their children the broader situation of the war, they noted that they often told to their children personal stories of fleeing from Vukovar and other negative wartime experiences. As one Serb mother stated: *“My father-in-law ended up in... for three months, in a concentration camp, together with the warriors. And he told [my son] everything about it, what he lived through. I told him what I lived through”* [S-MO-65]. Croat parents claimed to offer detailed accounts of defending Vukovar during the war and escaping from the city, including stories of imprisonment and the loss of loved ones. Through macro-narratives and personal family experiences, participants expressed a belief that Serb and Croat parents use the war to communicate messages about political life in Vukovar to their children.

Both parents and youth reported that many of the conversations about the war were initiated by children themselves. A handful of young people noted that they were not interested in learning about the war or did not want to talk about it; within this group, there was no pattern of avoidance by age or ethnicity. On the other hand, many youth participants engaged in a “search for meaning,” in which they reported to solicit information from their parents often following exposure to political messages from peers, schools, and the media. As one Serb father stated of his son: *“Well, we talk when we reach a common ground, meaning while watching TV and something like that is shown, and then a question is raised. So [my son] asks, we are Serbs,*

'Well okay dad, in which army were you?' So something must be said, and when you hear 'the Serbian army,' 'the paramilitary'... and now you have to explain... Delving deeply into the question of who caused the war, who started... for me it is important that he learns specific things directly" [S-FA-54]. One Croat 13-year-old explained: *"[My father] was in a concentration camp and I asked him what it was like there and... And I was interested in that, what it was like there...He told me they were beating them all of the time and so"* [C-13-F-16]. This participant described her interactions with her father, a Croatian war defender⁴ and soldier in Vukovar, and how she prompted him to share stories and information about the war.

3.1.1.2. Ethnicity. Young people reported that they learned about their ethnic identity through interactions with their parents. Several parent participants described an initial lack of understanding about ethnic differences among their children. They claimed that their children did not know about ethnic differences, and/or were too young to understand them. For example, one Serb mother stated: *"In our kindergarten, there was a separate entrance for Croats, and a separate entrance for Serbs. And the children couldn't understand why they had to enter there, and we had to enter here"* [S-MO-65]. She claimed that children did not yet understand the implications of their ethnic membership.

Accordingly, participants noted that many young people began to learn about their ethnicity through discussions with their parents. Participants reported that young people, in many cases, initiated such conversations so as to seek explanation or clarification from their parents. For example, one Serb mother recalled a particular ethnically-relevant conversation in which she participated with her daughter: *"[My daughter] asked me 'What am I?' She knows we celebrate*

⁴ War defenders were those that fought as members of the Croatian forces during the Battle of Vukovar, either as soldiers in the Croatian national army, officers in the Vukovar police force, or as residents of Vukovar and surrounding cities who volunteered to protect their city (Sebetovsky, 2002).

*Slava*⁵ and other such customs, but she wasn't aware of the nationality... Only recently, when she was in fourth or fifth grade, did we explain some things to her" [S-MO-64]. Through this recollection, the Serb mother illustrated the extent to which she engaged in discussions with her daughter about matters of ethnicity, as well as her daughter's curiosity about ethnic group differences. One Croat mother also described a conversation that she held with her daughter regarding matters of ethnicity: "I asked [my daughter] whether there was any difference between [name omitted], who was one such person [a Serb], and me, as a woman, as a person. She said there wasn't. Only, [name omitted] says mleko, and we say mlijeko" [C-MO-58]. In this example, the Croat mother offered an example of her daughter's understanding of ethnic differences through the pronunciation of "milk" in the Serbian and Croatian languages.

3.1.2. Peers. Focus group participants noted that peers were important agents of political socialization for young people. Peers were believed, by participants, to become increasingly relevant as agents of socialization as youth got older and spent more time with their friends and outside of their homes. However, participants reported that youth continued to turn to their parents for explanation or clarification of ethnic matters brought up during conversations with their peers. For instance, one Croat 13-year-old described the discussions that he has with his friends about the war: "Well sometimes when I talk with my friends, who are of Serbian nationality, then sometimes we debate about [the war], but we never argue, we just talk normally and then I ask my mum or dad" [C-13-M-67]. This participant offered an example of the interactions that he has with his parents following conversations with his peers on ethno-political matters. He illustrated not only in the socializing influence of his peers, but also in the interactive

⁵ A family tradition of the Serbian Orthodox church in which Serbs ritually glorify the patron saint of their family on that saint's feast day (Gavrilović, 2003).

capacity of his parents, in response to his peers, to shape the development of his political attitudes.

3.1.3. Schools. According to focus group participants, educational settings play a key role in the political socialization of youth, influencing the political attitudes and behaviors of young people through curriculum about the war and through the organization of commemoration services. Reports of planned classroom instruction about the war demonstrated variation by ethnicity and age. Such instruction, according to participants, was evident primarily among Croat youth, and not among Serb youth, and among 15-year-old participants, but not among 11- or 13-year-olds. As one Serb stated: *“It’s not mentioned in school”* [S-15-M-34]. Other Serb participants could not recall a specific instance in which the subject matter was discussed in the school context. Croat youth, on the other hand, articulated the ways in which political issues were broached at school. One Croat 15-year-old described the kind of information that his teacher presents to him in the classroom: *“Well nothing, like, the war, basic information, he puts on a song about the war, I mean, he like puts on Thompson⁶, about what happened in Vukovar”* [C-15-M-32]. He went on to describe how he learned about ethnic relations through classroom instruction: *“You also learn it in History class... We [Croats and Serbs] weren’t always best friends”* [C-15-M-32]. Though 11- and 13-year-old participants did not claim to learn about the war in school, they still described their education in Croatian history. One 11-year-old Croat stated: *“In fourth grade we studied about Yugoslavia and Franjo Tuđman⁷ a little”* [C-11-M-03]. Statements such as these acknowledge a belief that schools in Vukovar enable young people of different ages to accumulate knowledge about political matters, which may affect their subsequent reasoning about political issues.

⁶ A Croat nationalist pop singer.

⁷ The first president of Croatia.

Beyond classroom instruction, schools were identified by participants to function as agents of political socialization through the organization of commemoration services on November 18th, “The Day of the Fall of Vukovar,” the anniversary of the day that Croatian defenders in Vukovar surrendered to Serb forces. Though Croat students reported participating in school-organized commemoration services on November 18th, Serb students claimed not to attend.⁸ One 11-year-old Croat described the school-sponsored commemoration services:

The other day, when it was The Day of the Fall of Vukovar, we had a performance, so to say. I don't know, and then we took part in things, like recital, and we made some presentations. And so... the parents came to watch us, and then we went to the cemetery to light some candles. And later that day we went from the hospital to the cemetery, and we could see the candles we lit at Memorial sites in the city strongly associated with war [C-11-F-04].

This Croat youth illustrated her experiences on the day of commemoration and highlighted her visitation of key landmarks and monuments in Vukovar. She depicted the ways in which she believes that schools serve as agents of political socialization, specifically for Croat youth, by their organization of services that orient young people to the social context of the war.

3.1.4. Media. Finally, focus group participants established a belief that the media also serves as a critical agent in the political socialization of young people. Parents and youth reported that young people learn about the war and ethnic differences through television and through video documentaries. They claimed that media coverage of matters pertaining to the war and to ethnic differences is most prevalent around the commemoration of the Day of the Fall of Vukovar. As one Serb mother stated: “November 18th is approaching... That’s when it

⁸ On November 18th, Serb students select not to attend school and do not participate in commemoration services so as to avoid tense intergroup encounters. Serb students are not prohibited from attending (Biro et al., 2004).

happened. Chetniks⁹ did that. Chetniks. So, it's a time of [media] bombardment, naturally. We're all spending time in front of TV" [S-MO-65]. Two Croat mothers also described their children's exposure to messages about the war during this period:

[C-MO-59]: *I think there is a lot of talk about war. Every year. Either this way, or through the movies and the TV...*

[C-MO-58]: *That's true. My little girl, last year we were watching TV on the day the Fall of Vukovar was commemorated, there were all those documentaries and everything. She wanted to go out, but I told her to sit tight and watch the program, saying it's interesting, showing her some of the streets she might not recognize from the bombing. She told me, 'Mom, I already know all that. That was on TV before. I already saw it all.'*

These mothers noted the political information that is disseminated via the media during the commemoration period in Vukovar.

Focus group participants reported that media contributed to the political socialization of youth not only directly, through explicit messages and footage, but also indirectly, through sparking interactions between young people and their parents during and after exposure to the material. One Serb father described such interactions with his son: *"Sometimes we don't talk about [the war] for days or something on the TV...stimulates a conversation about something. He asks, so I reply,"* the father stated [S-FA-52]. In examining these interactions, it is important to recognize the agency of youth; that is, young people search for meaning and engage with subjects of political relevance of their own will.

3.2. Lived Realities of Political Socialization: Youth as Political Actors

⁹ Chetniks were paramilitary Serb units that were responsible for mass executions of Croats. The term has derogative meaning in Croatia.

Focus groups explored the ways in which youth function as socialized political actors – individuals with the capacity to contribute to societal reconstruction and reconciliation – in ways that served to *maintain* the status quo of intergroup tension and community division or to *challenge* the status quo and promote more positive intergroup relations. In these domains, youth were believed to demonstrate the effects of political socialization in their orientations toward intergroup interactions, their experiences of intergroup contact and conflict, and their opinions about and recommendations for integrated education.

3.2.1. Maintaining the status quo of intergroup tension. Through their reported attitudinal and behavioral dispositions toward intergroup interactions, youth demonstrated the capacity to maintain the status quo of intergroup tension and community division. For example, several young participants expressed preference for in-groups members and avoidance of out-group members. *“I just play with my peers, from my school, from my class,”* said one 11-year-old Croat [C-11-F-06]. *“We’re not really together, the Croats and the Serbs. Serbs spend more time among themselves. Our class... We don’t want to get involved with anyone else,”* said one 11-year-old Serb [S-11-M-07]. Youth participants, furthermore, described their experiences of peer pressure not to cross ethnic lines for friendship or acquaintance. Several youth participants admitted that they must distance themselves from their cross-group friends, for fear of peer disdain. For example, one 13-year-old Serb stated: *“I have a friend who’s almost my best friend from the Croatian shift and then the rest of her friends were telling her that how can she hang out with me, I’m Serbian, that my parents or something, someone related to me killed her folks and nonsense like that... Well, she distanced herself from me a bit since then. She said she doesn’t mind that I’m Serbian but she minds what they’ll say about her”* [S-13-F-20]. In reports

such as these, participants described how youth demonstrated the effects of political socialization by acting in ways that preserve intergroup division.

Youth's reported experiences of intergroup conflict were believed to perpetuate further intergroup tensions. Participants noted that intergroup conflict between Croats and Serbs took on several forms: non-physical threat, cyber and verbal conflict, low-level physical conflict, and more severe physical conflict. Many of these conflicts were claimed to revolve around the war and matters of ethnicity. One 13-year-old Serb described her experiences of intergroup conflict: *"Nowadays the younger generations mostly in the Croatian shifts attack our folks. They tell us that we are Chetniks, that we murdered their parents"* [S-13-F-19]. A 15-year-old Croat confirmed: *"[We argue] about stupid things, and then offending on a national level starts"* [C-15-F-33]. As demonstrated in this statement, participants described how many intergroup conflicts between Croat and Serb youth originated as benign and relatively neutral, and then to escalate along ethno-political dimensions. Among older youth, reports emerged of more severe intergroup conflict. One 15-year-old Serb participant recalled: *"A boy was attacked in a bus. There wasn't really any reason, just because he was a Croat. He sang songs, provocative ones, and this guy took a knife and I don't know. He did something to him. And the bus stopped. They called the police. And they went to court because of it"* [S-15-F-38]. This incident, too, depicted a perception of the escalation of milder conflicts into more severe intergroup violence.

Finally, participants expressed that youth demonstrated the effects of political socialization through their attitudes toward integrated education, which maintained the status quo. Some youth argued that the schooling system should remain separated by ethnicity to prevent intergroup conflict. *"I would argue with them constantly,"* said one 15-year-old Serb [S-15-M-37]. *"It's better like this,"* said an 11-year-old Croat, *"Because the children would argue,*

and fight, 'these were better at war,' 'those gave in,' 'no, we were better'... I think that's how it would be" [C-11-F-04]. In this example, the participant explicitly mentioned the war as a justification for maintaining the current system of separation.

Youth participants also argued that schools should remain divided so as to foster the rights of each ethnic group to study their own culture and history, and in their own language, consistent with Croatian policies that seek to protect minority rights to an education (Čorkalo et al., 2004). One 13-year-old Serb claimed: *"I think it's good that we have Croatian and Serbian shifts because everyone can choose where they want to go, since everyone has their choice, their opinion and I respect that. Whatever school they choose to go, I respect that"* [S-13-F-19]. Participants demonstrated their understanding of ethnic differences and the implications of these differences in the education system in a way that supports the status quo of intergroup division.

3.2.2. Challenging the status quo. On the other hand, focus groups also revealed a belief in the ways that youth disrupt the existing state of community relations through their orientations toward intergroup contact. Many youth participants, acknowledging the ethnic division into which they had been socialized, claimed to pursue friendships and relationships based on feelings of safety and good character, rather than on ethnic membership. *"I play with both the Serbs and the Croats. It doesn't matter to me at all, this nationality thing,"* stated one 11-year-old Serb [S-11-M-07]. A 15-year-old Croat described her friendships with Serbs: *"Yeah, as if they weren't Serbian at all, we don't consider this nationality so much, because, if we did – what would this town come to?"* [C-15-F-28]. This participant explicitly addressed the negative effects of intergroup division and selected to overcome that division through personal relationships.

Participants also explained how youth disrupted the status quo through their intergroup interactions and behaviors. Focus group data reported the existence of cross-group friendships

outside of school, often resulting from youths' participation in sports and extracurricular activities. One 15-year-old Croat stated: *"Well I do hang out with Serbs...and some of them are good friends of mine"* [C-15-M-30]. An 11-year-old Serb stated: *"I've been practicing at a club where there are, how do I say this, a lot of Croats, for four years now... And now I've found my best friend among them"* [S-11-F-09]. Croats and Serbs described the ways in which they overcome ethnic divides through cross-group interaction.

Finally, focus group data established a perception of youth as political actors, as youth expressed their attitudes toward and recommendations for integrated education in Vukovar. Youth participants maintained that they are open to integrated education because they believe that it would reduce intergroup conflicts, allow for cross-group friendships, and accelerate reconciliation between Croats and Serbs. *"I don't even like the fact that we are separated in shifts, Serbian/Croatian, it would be better if we were together, and those conflicts wouldn't happen anymore, we'd all be equal,"* stated a 13-year-old Serb [S-13-M-22]. In support of educational integration, two areas of recommendations to integrate the school system emerged: acceptance and reduced intergroup conflict, and Croatian curriculum with Serb-specific course options. Youth of both Croat and Serb ethnicities stated that they would be open to attending class with members of different ethnic groups as long as these individuals didn't insult them; that an integrated school would be acceptable, *"without the teasing and stuff"* [C-11-M-02]. In addition, several of the youth participants, particularly those of Croat ethnicity, adopted a more assimilationist view of integrated education. One Croat 15-year-old stated: *"I think they shouldn't have school in Serbian and in Croatian, because again it's separation. They could've just put it, so, school's in Croatian but there's Serbian as an extra subject, which Serbs would take"* [C-15-F-28]. Croat youth participants viewed the education system as necessarily

Croatian, yet allowed for Serbian course options in accordance with minority rights. Youth participants developed suggestions by which integrated education could be possible. By thinking beyond the current system of divided schooling, they demonstrated belief in their potential political agency and ability to change the status quo in Vukovar.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to understand the varying roles that agents play in the political socialization of youth in Vukovar, Croatia. It sought to explore the nature and content of the politically-relevant attitudes being transmitted to youth, and the lived realities of youth as political actors. First, qualitative analyses revealed a belief in the importance of parents, peers, schools, and the media in the development of youth's political attitudes. Second, youth participants demonstrated socialized political identities through their orientations toward intergroup interactions, their reported experiences of intergroup contact and conflict, and their opinions about integrated education. Despite some examples of questioning the status quo, the understanding among many participants was that youth recreate the political messages to which they are exposed during interactions with agents of socialization. Although some avoided any discussion of war, the focus group participants' predominant perspective reflected an understanding that the political socialization of youth operated to preserve intergroup tensions in Vukovar.

4.1. Agents of Political Socialization

Focus group members articulated the explicit influences of parents, peers, schools, and the media in the development of youth's political orientations. In contrast to past research that suggests a non-significant correlation of parent-child ethnic attitudes (Aboud & Doyle, 1996), participants noted that parents are critical socialization agents through explicit discussions and

explanations of the war and ethnicity. Parents also responded to their children's search for meaning following their children's exposure to political messages from peers, schools, and the media. In the present study, parents were construed as filters through which political messages were processed by young people. They modified and reinforced the messages that were transmitted by other agents.

The explicit role of peers was less frequently mentioned during focus groups. Although some youth participants reported having discussions and debates with their peers about the war and topics pertaining to ethnicity, these examples were rare. This is consistent with the literature which suggests that many, though not all, youth remain politically uninterested during their adolescence (Kuhn, 2004). It is also possible that peer interactions might serve to reinforce already internalized political attitudes, rather than political behaviors and beliefs (Kuhn, 2004).

Parents and young people explained how schools helped to mold youth as political actors through explicit discussion and instruction about the war and Croatian history. Past research has demonstrated the importance of educational settings for political socialization (Stringer et al., 2010; Torney-Purta, 2002). In this sample, *schools might be understood* to be more relevant as agents of political socialization for Croats, in comparison to Serbs, and for older youth (age 15), in comparison to younger youth (ages 11 and 13). Though children in Vukovar begin to learn about Croatian history in fifth grade, they do not learn about the recent war until eighth grade (Vican & Milanovic Litre, 2006), when students are approximately 14-years-old.

The media, in the form of television and video documentaries, also shaped young people's political attitudes, according to focus group participants. Though *the media was described as transmitting* directly messages to children and youth about the war, particularly around the Day of the Fall of Vukovar, parents often claimed to modify or reinforce these

messages. Children in our sample recalled frequently engaging with their parents in discussions during and after viewings of documentaries and political media programs. This is consistent with McDevitt's (2006) model of developmental provocation, which illustrates the ways in which children initiate political conversations with their parents based on exposure to news media.

4.2. Lived Realities of Political Socialization: Youth as Political Actors

Through assessment of the lived realities of youth's political socialization, this study examined beliefs about how young people disrupt and maintain the status quo in the Croat and Serb communities of Vukovar, through their orientations toward intergroup interactions, their experiences of intergroup contact and conflict, and their attitudes toward integrated education. Previous research has suggested that youth, in comparison to adults, may have grander plans for change and may be less impeded by experience (Galtung, 2006); thus, they bear a greater capacity to disrupt the status quo. In the context of Vukovar, however, processes of political socialization transmit knowledge and experiences, which inhibit adults who, in turn, inhibit youth, thus diminishing the ability of young people to overturn the current socio-political trends. The "impressionable years" (Sears & Brown, 2013) of the study's youth participants are shaped by ethnic division, ethnically-based power sharing, non-ambiguous messages on ethnic group status and other politically-relevant aspects of social relations which all determine (and reflect) political dynamics in the community. In this regard, even as reflected by their orientation towards intergroup interactions, playing with peers, and other mundane activities, youth are "actors" in a sense that they participate in following the "rules of the game" and thus help in maintaining the social order.

Though bearing the capacity to disrupt the status quo, young people more often maintained the ethnic division. For example, youth articulated instances of peer pressure not to

cross group lines and expressed fear of in-group reprisal and by their endorsement of out-group avoidance. Moreover, despite cross-group friendships through extra-curricular activities, [they](#) also claimed to engage in varying levels of intergroup conflict, such as escalation of neutral conflicts along ethnic lines. Toward this end, opinions about integrated education reflected further division. Many youth argued that divided classrooms prevent intergroup conflict and protect each group's right to learn their own culture, history, and language. Among several students who expressed openness to integrated education, qualifying statements especially by Croat youth, arose. Overall, young people did not recreate messages that could mitigate intergroup tension. Instead, [with very few exceptions](#), the comments of parents and young people indicated a perspective that youth re-enact political messages from parents, peers schools, and the media, through their attitudes and behaviors that serve to preserve intergroup tension in Vukovar.

The findings of this study are relevant for theory and scholarship on intergroup relations, particularly in contexts of protracted violence and post-accord peacebuilding. First, this study supports the claim that political socialization is relevant to maintaining the current state of affairs, though it leaves open the notion that the transmission of political information, for the purposes of supporting the status quo, is deliberate. Second, in accordance with Bronfenbrenner's social ecological framework (1977), this study revealed multiple layers of the child's social ecology to be active in the development of his/her political orientations during the individual's search for meaning. Finally, although young people expressed lived realities of political socialization in ways that operate to maintain the status quo, the data also revealed youths' desires and recommendations for more positive intergroup relations. Given this understanding, it is important to discover the factors that might influence such positive outlooks,

particularly when it appears that parents, peers, schools, and the media are socializing young people in an opposing way.

4.3. Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the strengths of ten focus groups including multiple reporters and youth of various developmentally-relevant age groups from both Croat and Serb communities, this study faced some methodological limitations. First, mothers, fathers, and youth in our sample were not related as parent-child triads. Therefore, it was impossible to confirm the direct effects of parents as agents of socialization or to associate particular parental characteristics with the development of young people's attitudes. Second, as mothers and fathers participated in separate focus groups, this study was not able to examine the degree of consensus between mother-father dyads. Third, although focus groups are appropriate for gaining understanding of contextually-relevant concepts related to collective experiences, having advantages over individual interviews void of the interactional nature across participants (Barbour, 2007), they may also be constrained by "group think," peer effects, or other micro-dynamics within the discussion (Frankland & Bloor, 1998; Muldoon et al., 2007; Waterton & Wynne, 1998). Finally, the qualitative focus group approach may be strengthened when complemented by mixed or quantitative methods, which may also allow for greater sample size and generalizability.

This study has found that youth hold attitudes and engage in behaviors that affect the maintenance of intergroup tension in Vukovar. Future research may seek to complement the beliefs presented in this study with more direct evidence of the role of the media, the school curriculum and ethos, and children's direct experiences of intergroup contact. An analysis of parental views regarding changes in youth attitudes and behaviors over time would also be valuable.

This study poses implications for policy and intervention. Prevention and intervention approaches should attend to the influence of parents, educating them on the ways in which they transmit political messages to their children and the effects of such messages. Policymakers would be advised, furthermore, to address the situation of separated education in Vukovar as divisive and challenging to intergroup relations in the community. As youth are drawn to media for news and information, media personnel must strive for the un-biased coverage of political events.

Finally, the creation of outlets through which young people can function as positive political actors and engage in the social reconstruction of Vukovar may contribute to post-accord peacebuilding. Political involvement may have positive psychological effects for children in situations of violence and intergroup tension (McEvoy-Levy, 2006). Moreover, youth can be highly effective agents of social change (Helsing, Kirlic, McMaster, & Sonnenschein, 2006). For this reason, it is useful to consider how to empower young people and the positive effect that they might have in their communities in settings of protracted ethnic tension and political violence.

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Table: Composition of Focus Groups

| Age | Croat | Serb |
|--------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 11-years-old | n=6 (50% male; 50% female) | n=7 (42.86% male; 57.14% female) |
| 13-years-old | n=6 (50% male; 50% female) | n=8 (50% male; 50% female) |
| 15-years-old | n=6 (50% male; 50% female) | n=9 (55.56% male; 44.44% female) |
| Mothers | n=6 (M = 42.33, SD = 7.34) | n=6 (M = 40.0, SD = 6.42) |
| Fathers | n=7 (M = 41.14, SD = 4.95) | n=5 (M = 42.6, SD = 3.65) |

Appendix

1. Perception of threat/safety in the community (non-ethnically based) and experience with non-ethnically based violence

- 1.1. How is it for you to live in Vukovar? Is it safe to be outside at night? Do you think that something bad might happen to you when you are returning home at night?
- 1.2. Has anyone ever threatened you with a weapon, beaten you up, or taken something that belonged to you, so that you were afraid that you will get hurt?

2. Perception of ethnically related threat

- 2.1. How do your parents feel if you spend time with Serbs?
- 2.2. How do Serbs behave when they meet Croats?

3. Experiences with interethnic violence

- 3.1. Have you ever had unpleasant experiences with Serbs?
- 3.2. Have you seen someone from the Serb community threaten with a weapon or beat up a Croat?

4. Perception of interethnic tensions and relations

Current:

- 4.1. Are there any differences when you spend time with your Serb and Croat peers?
- 4.2. Could you think about the last time when you talked with your parents about relations between Croats and Serbs in Vukovar?
- 4.3. Do you spend time with Serbs in your school?
- 4.4. Could you think of some examples that describe relations between Croats and Serbs in Vukovar today?

Past:

4.5. Do you ever talk about what happened to your family during the war?

Future:

4.6. Do you think Croats and Serbs in Vukovar can reconcile?